



## BILLINGS GAZETTE

### Gazette opinion: Let's strengthen Montana's child safety net



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Nearly 100 calls a day ring into the Montana Child Abuse Hotline. The volume has risen sharply in recent years, along with the number of abuse and neglect investigations conducted by the Child and Family Services Division.

The number of Montana children in foster care hit a record high this past year with 2,400 children, according to CFSD. That's an increase of 20 percent over the past two years and a 60-percent increase since 2008, according to Sarah Corbally, division administrator in Helena.

"We're barely keeping up," Corbally said last week.

The higher number of children in out-of-home placements reflects the increase in abuse/neglect reports and a new, more thorough safety assessment used by all CFSD investigators since January 2012, she said.

Montana lawmakers soon will see the division's biennial report saying that "growth has significantly increased the caseload for staff and with the increased caseload, the growth has increased associated work-related stress."

The division responsible for protecting children has tried to cope with the higher workload by using emergency funds allocated by Gov. Steve Bullock to hire 13 front-line caseworkers the 2013 Legislature refused to fund. The division also let seven foster care licensing jobs go empty so seven more caseworkers could be hired.

Because those jobs aren't part of the base budget, the caseworkers had to be hired as "temporary" workers, making recruiting that much harder for a tough job that requires a college degree and starts at just over \$35,000 a year. (The starting wage is close to the average wage because so many caseworkers are relatively new.)

Since the Legislature last met, the division has reorganized supervision, revamped its training, and focused on helping good caseworkers stay in their often traumatic jobs.

Those changes have slowed down turnover Corbally said. Two years ago, the division reported a 42 percent caseworker turnover rate. In calendar 2014, that rate dropped to 22 percent.

"We are making progress, we aren't where we need to be," Corbally said.

Another change over the past biennium is greater reliance on kinship care for children who are removed from their parents' home. Kinship care means placing the child with a relative or another adult who already has a positive relationship with the child. The kin has to undergo background checks, but doesn't necessarily have to be licensed as a foster parent.

About 40 percent of foster placements now are in kinship care, Corbally said. If not for those arrangements, the need for licensed foster homes would be even greater.

The division is always recruiting and training new foster parents. The demand never ceases.

Gov. Steve Bullock's executive budget contains a proposal essential to improving child protection. He wants CFSD to be assessed by a national child protection accrediting agency to find out what it would take to bring Montana up to standards on caseloads, training and other key resources for keeping abused and neglected children safe.

The bill, which Rep. Pat Noonan, D-Butte, has agreed to sponsor, also proposes an appropriation of \$3 million in general fund dollars over the biennium to bring the division up to standards within two years. The bill also would authorize the division to spend about \$1.3 million in federal funds to meet accreditation standards.

This proposal is a good idea. Our criticism is that Bullock should have started talking it up earlier last year.

Yes, Montana must upgrade CFSD policies and practices to methods proven effective in preventing child abuse and neglect. Such important life-changing, life-saving work cannot be subject to across-the-board budget cuts and "vacancy savings" mandates. Montana must provide the resources necessary to protect its children and build stronger, safer families.

Bullock's plan to upgrade child protection is good; his administration must ensure Montana lawmakers know why it's needed.

Montana's Gazette opinion will focus on the surge in parental addictions that contributes to child abuse and neglect.

## LC 1089: Child and Family Services Division Data

Youth in Foster Care	
2014	2,398
2008	1,507
Increase	59.12%

Reports Requiring Investigation (January – November)	
2014	7,909
2013	6,125
Increase	29.12%

Number of Child Abuse and Neglect Cases Filed in District Court	Court Year 2009	Court Year 2010	Court Year 2011	Court Year 2012	Court Year 2013	Court Year 2014	Increase (2009-2013)
	1,006	1,030	1,208	1,494	1,527	Not Yet Available	+30.17%

### Authorized Funding Purposes:

- To contract with the national Council on Accreditation to assess the cost of achieving accreditation by meeting national standards in different areas;
- To adopt caseload standards and permit staffing in order to meet the standards;
- To improve the CFSD service array to include interventions demonstrated to improve outcomes for children and families unable to be supported within CFSD's existing budget;
- To support consideration of revisions to current rates to allow CFSD to provide incentives for providers who use interventions and services that have proven effective;
- To expand partnerships with county health departments that will allow public health nurses to be assigned to more youth served by CFSD; and
- To implement electronic records and update the case management system used by CFSD field staff that is old and inefficient and results in a large amount of time being spent entering data instead of working directly with children and families.